

III

Enrique Rides the Rails North toward the United States

As he pushes north, Mexico changes. In Oaxaca, he rolled through cattle country. It was so hot, the tracks behind him looked like a squiggly line, warped by heat. It was so humid that green moss balls grew on the electrical wires by the tracks. Enrique passed a river that was a block wide. He was drenched in sweat. When the train slowed, the smell of perspiration washed over him.

In Veracruz , he rode through rows of silvery pineapple plants and lush fields of tall, thin sugarcane stalks that brushed up against the train. He saw sugar mill smokestacks and homes where people put day-old tortillas on their tin roofs to dry. All around him were swamps and mosquitoes. He had to watch closely for bees. He had heard that many are Africanized bees, and when smoke from the locomotive angers them, they swarm and attack migrants on top of the cars.

As he pushes north, the trains keep changing too. Tracks are fastened to concrete ties, welded, and better maintained. The freight trains are longer and seem to glide more smoothly, roll more rapidly, and derail less frequently. Because there are more trains and because so many migrants have been hurt or detained back in Chiapas, fewer riders are on board. On some trains, Enrique sees only a dozen others.

In Orizaba, the train changes crews. Enrique asks a man standing near the tracks, “Can you give me one peso to buy some food?”

The man inquires about his scars. They are from the beating he got on top of the train, a little more than a week ago now. He gives Enrique 15 pesos , about \$ 1.50.

Enrique runs to buy soda and cheese to go with his bread. He looks north. Beyond a range of verdant mountains he sees the snow-covered Pico de Orizaba, the highest summit in Mexico . Now it will turn icy cold, especially at night, much different from the steamy lowlands. Enrique begs two sweaters. Before the train pulls out, he runs from car to car, looking into the hollows at the ends of the hoppers, where riders occasionally discard clothing. In one, he finds a blanket.

As the train starts, Enrique shares his cheese, soda, and rolls with two other boys, also headed for the United States. One is thirteen. The other is seventeen. Silently, Enrique thanks the food throwers again for the bread. He relishes the camaraderie: how riders take care of one another, pass along what they know, divide what they have.

Migrants will often designate one person to look out for trouble while the others rest. They give one another advice. In spots along the route where the train slows and migrants sprint from the

shadows to board, reaching for the ladders, migrants riding atop the cars shout out if the train is going too fast. “Don’t do it! You’ll get nailed!” they yell.

When Enrique lands an extra shirt or a tip about where to avoid the police, he shares. Other migrants have been generous with him. They have told him Mexican words they have learned. One offered a bit of soap when Enrique slipped into a shallow green river to bathe.

Enrique realizes that the friendships will be fleeting. Very few who set out together, including brothers, end up together. Often, migrants abandon an injured member of their group rather than risk being caught by the authorities. As he waits in Veracruz for a train to leave, a thirty-one-year-old Salvadoran recalls how he recently watched a man get his right leg cut off as he was trying to elude la migra at a train stop. The Salvadoran stripped off his shirt and used it to wrap a tourniquet around the leg. Then he ran away, fearful la migra would arrest him.

“Don’t leave me!” the injured man cried out.

The authorities said the man died later that day.

Often, between train rides, Enrique prefers to sleep alone in a tall clump of grass, away from other migrants, knowing it will make him less of a target. Still, camaraderie often means survival. “I could get to the north faster alone,” he figures, “but I might not make it.”

The mountains close in. Enrique invites the two boys to share his blanket. Together they will be warmer. The three jam themselves between a grate and an opening on top of a hopper. Enrique stuffs rags under his head for a pillow. The car sways, and its wheels click-clack quietly. They sleep.

The train enters a tunnel, the first of thirty-two in the Cumbres de Acultzingo, the Peaks of Acultzingo. Each tunnel is named for a state in Mexico. Migrants tick off the states they have passed — and the many they still have to go. Outside is bright sun. Inside is darkness so black that riders cannot see their hands. They shout, “¡Ay! ¡Ay! ¡Ay! ¡Ay! ¡Ay!” and listen for the echo. Sometimes the tail of the train hasn’t left one tunnel before the locomotive dives into another. The freight cars creak as they turn the curves. Enrique and his friends sleep on.

Back in the daylight, the train hugs a hillside. Below, a valley is filled with fields of corn, radishes, and lettuce, each a different hue of green.

El Mexicano is the longest tunnel. For eight minutes, the train vanishes inside. Black diesel smoke rises, hugging the tops of the cars. It burns the lungs and stings the eyes. Some of the migrants bolt down the ladders, trying to escape the noxious haze. Enrique’s eyes are closed, but his face and arms turn gray. His nose runs black soot.

Engineers fear El Mexicano. If a locomotive overheats, they must stop. Riders spring for the arched exits, gasping for clean air. Back outside, ice forms on the train cars. Migrants huddle

between the cars or with strangers, seeking protection from the biting wind. Riders ache and shiver. Many don't have a blanket or a sweater. Some wear T-shirts. Their lips crack, and their eyes grow dull. They hug themselves. Three cram into the hole at the end of a hopper. To fit, they must sit on one another, hands across the chest, heads down. They pull their shirts over their mouths to warm themselves with their breath. When the train slows, they jog alongside to ward off the cold. Some risk moving forward to the last of the train's three locomotives to press against the engine. Some stand in the warm plumes of diesel smoke. Others jump inside hoppers full of sand or grain, but only if they can find cars that are full enough that they will be able to crawl out.

As night falls, some of the older migrants drink whiskey. Too much, and they tumble off. Others gather old clothing and trash and build fires on the ledges over the wheels of the hoppers. They hold their hands close to the fire, then press their palms to their frigid faces.

At dawn, the tracks straighten and level out. At one and a half miles above sea level, the train accelerates to 35 miles per hour. Enrique awakens. He sees cultivated cactus on both sides. Directly in front rise two huge pyramids — the pre-Aztec metropolis of Teotihuacán. Then he sees switches and semaphores. Housing developments. A billboard for Paradise Spa. A sewage ditch. Taxis. The train slows for the station at Lechería. Enrique gets ready to run.

He is in Mexico City.

Suspicion

The Veracruz hospitality has vanished. One Mexico City woman wrinkles her nose when she talks about migrants. She is hesitant to slide the dead bolt on the metal door of her tall stucco fence. "I'm afraid of them. They talk funny. They're dirty."

Enrique starts knocking on doors. He begs for food. In Mexico City, crime is rampant. In some churches, groups of bandits have entered during Mass and robbed all the parishioners at once. Churches hire armed guards to ensure peaceful services.

In Mexico City, people are edgy and often hostile. "We don't have anything," they say at house after house, usually through locked doors.

In Lechería, one resident, Olivia Rodríguez Morales, the wife of a retired railroad mechanic, lives just one block south of the station in a rust-colored boxcar she's converted into a home. Rodríguez is a soft-spoken woman with silver-rimmed spectacles and a gold cross on a chain around her neck. Yet when she is asked about migrants, she stops knitting a blue shawl and stiffens; her demeanor turns cold.

One afternoon, Rodríguez recalls, six migrants along the tracks asked a young man from the neighborhood for some money. He said no. That night, as he was walking home, the same migrants grabbed him near the station. They tied his hands with barbed wire. They took his money, his watch, and his clothes. They beat him over the head with a machete. They left him naked. It rained that night. Slowly, the young man dragged himself to his door. He was in critical condition and spent three months in the hospital. Although he never spoke of it, Rodríguez and other neighbors heard that he had been raped by the migrants. In the close-knit railroad employee community, most had known the man since he was a boy.

Before, she had felt pity for migrants. She had offered them food and help. Now, when migrants ask her, several times a day, for help — a taco, a coffee, a shirt, or a pair of socks — she always turns them down flat. “We don’t trust them,” she says. “After that, people closed their doors.”

Each dawn, when residents head out for their jobs, they worry. Are the migrants hiding in clumps of yellow flowers between the tracks innocents traveling north or dangerous men who are running from the law in their own countries? “You don’t know who they are. Some come out of necessity. Some may be fleeing some problem,” Rodríguez says.

Her neighbor Oscar Aereola Peregrino, agrees. “Por uno pagan todos. One sins, and everyone pays,” he says.

Enrique goes house to house, hoping for mercy. Finally, at one house, another gift: a woman offers him tortillas, beans, and lemonade. Now he must hide from the state police, who guard the depot at Lechería, a gritty industrial neighborhood on the northwestern outskirts of Mexico City. Enrique is surrounded by smokestacks. There is a scrap metal recycling plant, a sprawling Goodyear tire factory, and a plastics factory. The railroad tracks are littered with broken dolls, old tires, dead dogs, and worn shoes. He must avoid la migra, which sometimes shows up at the station in unmarked cars.

Most migrants at the station hide between or inside boxcars or in the grass. Enrique crawls into a three-foot-wide concrete culvert, one of several in a field north of the station. The field is filled with cows and sheep and bursting with yellow and purple flowers. Before, when he made it this far, he spent the night curled up in the culvert with other migrants. The police never saw him. Barring bad luck, he tells himself, he might make it to the border.

Enrique is thirteen miles from the heart of Mexico’s rail system. Still, the station here, separated into two staging areas and six tracks, bustles with activity. Trains heading into Mexico City stop first in Lechería to leave any cars with combustible contents. On their way north, they stop to pick the cars back up. Fifteen trains leave Lechería every twenty-four hours, says José Patricio Sánchez Arellano, who handles human resources for Lechería and other stations for Ferrocarril y Terminal del Valle de México.

Outside the culvert where Enrique hides, trains clang and crash as they add and subtract cars, forming trains that are nearly a mile long. Enrique must pick wisely. Not all of the trains go all the way to the border. Many migrants look for trains operated by Ferrosur, one of three train companies that operate out of the station. Ferrosur has fewer security guards. Another company, Transportación Ferroviaria Mexicana, sometimes puts guards on its trains to prevent anyone from using wire cutters to open sealed boxcars and steal merchandise.

At 10:30 P.M., a northbound train arrives. This is the train Enrique prefers. It travels all the way to the Texas border, mostly at night, when the dark will make it harder for him to be detected. From Mexico City onward, the rail system is more modern, and trains run so fast that few migrants ride on top. Enrique notices a few train cars that are unusual. In Lechería, train companies sometimes load a large closed container the size of a boxcar into a slightly larger, open container — a box inside a half box. Some migrants slide into a small spot between the two containers. But if the train suddenly brakes and the inside container shifts, it can press them against the other container and kill them.

Enrique and his two friends pick a boxcar. He braces the door open with a rock. If they are caught inside, it will be hard to escape, but they count on the scarcity of migra checkpoints in northern Mexico. Four of five times along this part of the route, one rail official estimates, authorities don't stop the train. The boys load cardboard to lie on and stay clean.

Enrique notices a blanket on a nearby hopper. He climbs a ladder to get it and hears a loud buzz from overhead. Live wires carry electricity above the trains for 143 miles north. Once used for locomotives that no longer operate, the wires still carry 25,000 volts to prevent vandalism. Signs warn:

DANGER — HIGH VOLTAGE.

But many of the migrants cannot read. They do not even need to touch the lines to be killed. The electricity arcs up to twenty inches. Only thirty-six inches separates the wires from the tallest freight cars, the auto carriers.

In railroad offices in Mexico City, in a large control room, computers plot train routes with blue and green lines, and at least once every six months the screens flicker, then black out. That means a migrant has crawled on top of a car, been hit by electricity, and short-circuited the system. When the computers reboot, the screens flash red where it happened.

Enrique climbs the hopper car. Carefully, he snatches a corner of the blanket and yanks it down. Then he scrambles back to his boxcar and settles into a bed that he and his friends have fashioned out of straw they found inside. The boys share a bottle of water and one of juice.

The modern locomotives glide past the outer reaches of Mexico City. The landscape turns more and more desolate— sand and scrub brush, jackrabbits and snakes. They cross boulders, dry

riverbeds, and canyons with sheer rock walls. They plow through a heavy fog, and Enrique sleeps soundly— too soundly. He does not sense when police stop their train in the middle of the central Mexican desert. Officers dressed in black find the boys curled under their blanket in the straw. Enrique is afraid. The last time he was stopped here, he jumped down, grabbed two fistfuls of rocks, and barely eluded capture. Now, there is no place to run .

These officers take them to their jefe, who is cooking a pot of stew over a campfire. He pats them down to check for drugs. Then, instead of arresting them, he gives all three tortillas and water — and toothpaste to clean up. Enrique is astonished. The jefe lets them reboard the boxcar and tells them to get off the train before San Luis Potosí, where sixty-four railroad security officers guard the station.

When the train gets to within four blocks of the station, the guards drive alongside, arresting migrants as they jump off and turning them over to la migra. At midmorning, Enrique sees two flashing red antennas. The boys jump off the train half a mile south of town. His friends pay for a taxi to the north side. Enrique goes in search of food.

“We don’t have any,” people say.

Finally, one person gives him an orange. Another gives him three tacos. He shares them with his friends. Until now, Enrique has opted to keep moving. In the South, in a pinch, he could pick mangoes that grow along the tracks. Once, in Chiapas, he survived on mangoes for three days. But here the countryside is too desolate and dry to live off the land, and begging is too chancy. There are no agricultural fields in sight, just factories that make glass and furniture. He needs to work if he is going to survive.